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The Anti-Hero and the Wallflower Heroine: Moll Flanders and Mansfield Park in Dialogue

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Many narrative similarities pervade Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Both novels feature elements of the epistolary tradition: Defoe sets his text up as a history, whereas Austen makes use of letters between characters to enforce her novel's realism. Both novels feature the colonial sphere in some way. The largest similarity, however, comes from the upbringing of Moll and Fanny. Both characters come from poor origins and, during their childhoods, go to live with a wealthy family through the intervention of an external agent. Despite Fanny's blood relation to her benefactors, she and Moll function as servants to a certain extent. They benefit from the education of the other young ladies in the house. Finally, they both marry one of the gentlemen from the house they go to live in. Despite all these similarities though, Moll and Fanny represent two separate prototypical literary characters, the anti-hero, and the wallflower heroine, respectively. I believe this overarching difference comes from the discrepancy in the amount of agency afforded to each of these characters, which in turn indicates fundamental differences in the form of the novel that Defoe and Austen use.

Moll displays an incredible amount of agency considering her gender and the time period during which Defoe wrote the novel. Moll spends much of the novel propelling herself forward in terms of her social standing, which in turn demonstrates an important aspect of her character. As a child in the orphanage, Moll's description of her idea of a gentlewoman reflects her strong interior sense of personal agency: "all I understood by being a Gentlewoman, was to be able to Work for myself, and get enough to keep me without that terrible Bug-bear *going to Service*, whereas they meant to live Great, Rich, and High, and I know not what" (Defoe 14). What the other women around Moll mean by the term gentlewoman in fact sounds much like the description of Lady Bertram in *Mansfield Park*: "She was a woman who spent her days in sitting, nicely dressed, on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children, but very indulgent to the latter" (Austen 50). Moll

never seems to approach this kind of gentlewomanly behavior; possibly, during her first marriage Moll acted much the same as Lady Bertram, but the reader never sees such a display. The importance of Moll's idea of a gentlewoman, the text suggests, foreshadows Moll's hardships later in life. I do not mean that her sense of agency dooms her to a life of crime, rather that her sense of agency will propel her to go beyond the boundaries of societal acceptance, instead of remaining a passive observer such as Lady Bertram.

Moll retains an idea of the importance of her own agency from an early age, but she only gets the opportunity to realize that agency after the Mayor's family takes her in. Despite her position as a servant, her close proximity to the Mayor's daughters enables Moll to learn from the tutors brought in for the ladies: "and as I was always with them, I learn'd as fast as they; and tho' the Masters were not appointed to teach me, yet I learn'd by Imitation and enquiry, all that they learn'd by Instruction and Direction" (Defoe 18). Moll uses her natural agency to build herself up; Moll collects skills and knowledge that will assist her in the goal of becoming a gentlewoman. Most importantly, Moll discovers through her interactions with the two brothers in the house that her burgeoning sexuality affords her the greatest advantage in this endeavor: she uses it to gain attention and wealth. Ultimately, this sexuality helps to develop an active sense of her own self. An example of this sense of self, and her active will to preserve it, comes when she denies the younger brother's proposal of marriage by saying "yes, yes [...] you shall see I can Oppose him, I have learnt to say NO now, tho' I had not learnt it before; if the best Lord in the Land offer'd me Marriage now, I could cheerfully say NO to him" (32). The fact that Moll does marry the younger brother later on, might represent Defoe tempering the very active Moll with a sense of realism concerning the way women commanded at this time in terms of their marriages. More importantly, though, the marriage to the younger brother helps to build Moll's character into the prototypical anti-hero.

In contrast to Moll, Fanny demonstrates little to no agency at the beginning of *Mansfield Park*. When she comes to live with the Bertrams, Fanny appears to the readers as inexorably shy, so much so that the reader comes to know her only through her interactions with the other family members. For example, the narrator characterizes Fanny's development through Edmund: "Kept back as she was by every body else, his single support could not bring her forward, but his attentions were otherwise of the highest importance in assisting the improvement of her mind, and extending its pleasures" (Austen 52). Whereas Moll uses her surroundings to her advantage, the lack of Fanny's thoughts and actions for much of the beginning of the novel characterize her as largely passive. While Moll addresses her multitude of talents, much greater than those of the ladies she serves, Fanny sees herself as inherently inferior to her cousins. She tells Edmund that she "can never be important to any one," due to "everything – [her] situation – [her] foolishness and awkwardness" (56). This inferiority, which Edmund tries to dismiss, does not escape the commentary of other characters. Even before Fanny arrives at Mansfield Park, Sir Thomas remarks that he must, "without depressing her spirits too far [...] make her remember that she is not a *Miss Bertram*" (42). Fanny, like Moll, exists as the Other in the household she lives in. While Moll's Otherness comes from distinct class differences between her and the young gentlemen and gentlewomen of the house, Fanny's seems more subtle. Fanny's Otherness, while still classed to some degree, seems to come more from a more interior source. Her lack of active energy seems to place her in opposition to characters like Aunt Norris and Sir Thomas, thereby Othering her despite her familial relationship to such characters.

Given Fanny's lack of agency at the beginning of the novel, the development of that interior power requires more time in the narrative to accumulate, as opposed to Moll's natural tendency toward an active personality. While Fanny does remain passive for most of the novel, readers must not characterize her as submissive; Fanny demonstrates at several points an ability

to passively resist. Fanny's first moment of passive resistance comes during the play, when she refuses all entreaties for her to act. The culmination of this scene shows Aunt Norris saying to the room, including Fanny herself, "I shall think her a very obstinate, ungrateful girl, if she does not do what her aunt and cousins wish her – very ungrateful indeed, considering who and what she is" (167). For a character like Moll, an attack such as this one certainly would provoke a response. Fanny on the other hand merely retreats to her room. As stated, though, this retreat does not entail a submission, but instead plays with the subtle nature of Fanny's Otherness. In describing Fanny's room, the narrator writes, "the comfort of it in her hours of leisure was extreme. She could go there after any thing unpleasant below, and find immediate consolation in some pursuit, or some train of thought at hand" (171). The description of Fanny's room and the comfort she takes in it solidify her role as the wallflower heroine. The room defines and strengthens Fanny via her own Otherness. The language the narrator uses does not come in the grandiose, over-saturated sentimental style – it comes from realism. From this glimpse into Fanny's mind and the space she feels most comfortable in, the narrator encourages the reader to identify and sympathize with Fanny.

The second moment of resistance that Fanny offers comes from her refusal to marry Henry Crawford, much as Moll initially refuses the younger brother. Following the return of Sir Thomas from Antigua, Fanny only increases in worth, which correlates directly with the amount of agency allowed to her character. After her female cousins leave the house:

Fanny's consequence increased [...] Becoming as she then did, the only young woman in the drawing-room, the only occupier of that interesting division of a family in which she had hitherto held so humble a third, it was impossible for her not to be more looked at, more thought of and attended to. (220)

As Fanny's agency increases, so does her importance in the household, her beauty, and her marriageability. While Moll grooms herself for such a position, Fanny seems to glide into it; she does not attain this position by accident, but neither does she vie for more power or import.

However, Fanny's rejection of Henry does not mirror Moll's rejection of the younger brother. While Moll stands in absolute defiance, Fanny's resistance comes with apologies and tears and reminders of her position in life. Fanny suddenly becomes the bearer of the identifiers "wilful [sic] and perverse" because of her refusal to marry (323). Why does Fanny's rejection garner so much more derision than Moll's? Possibly, the difference in reaction comes from the class differences of the two characters, but I believe the reason deals more with the two prototypical characters developing from Moll and Fanny.

Fanny encounters scorn for her refusal to marry, while Moll seems uncensored in her rejection of the younger brother, Robin, at least initially. This point makes up one part of the difference between the anti-hero, Moll, and the wallflower-heroine, Fanny. A second part comes from the aftermath of the rejection. In the end of *Mansfield Park*, Fanny's rejection of Henry lies somewhere between applauded and forgotten, given Henry's removal from the sphere of Mansfield. Moll, on the other hand, marries the man she initially rejects. Moll suddenly seems stripped of her agency; when the older brother leaves her, she languishes in bed, sick and dejected, lamenting that "the bare loss of him as a Gallant was not so much my Affliction, as the loss of his Person, whom indeed I Lov'd to Distraction; and the loss of all the Expectations I had, and which I always had built my Hopes upon" (Defoe 36). Examination of this passage, however, will reveal that Moll still retains her agency. While Moll certainly could love the older brother, a large part of her sadness comes from the loss of the future she could have with him. For her, the money and position that come with the older brother make him superior to Robin. Therefore, her eventual marriage to the younger brother should not read as a form of submission, but a continuation of the active drive to better herself that Moll exhibits.

Moll marrying the younger brother signifies something important in the construction of the anti-hero prototype. When Moll encounters a problem, she breaks social convention in order

to overcome that obstacle. When she cannot marry her lover, the older brother, she must marry Robin in order to continue on her path toward social betterment. The way that Moll describes having slept with both brothers makes the relationship seem incestuous: “*I ask’d him warmly what Opinion he must have of my Modesty, that he could suppose, I should so much as Entertain a thought of lying with two Brothers?*” (35). Further on, circumstances force Moll to marry a criminal, marry her own brother, become a mistress to a married man, and become a criminal herself. John Richetti describes this cycle Moll seems caught in by saying, “right next to her exuberant chronicle of self-improvisation within the unpredictable, linear sequentiality of her life is a circular pattern of fatality and necessity” (492). Richetti argues that Moll’s choices do not come from some malevolent drive, but from the necessity imposed upon her by the situations she finds herself in. Simply, when faced with death via poverty, Moll chooses to steal rather than die. While Moll does claim that “the Devil carried me out and his Bait for me,” she preempts such sentiments with quotations such as “*Give me not Poverty least I Steal*” (151). Moll, as the anti-hero, goes against the social order, but justifies her position to the reader so that she does not emerge as the villain in her own tale. The necessity of her criminal behavior defines Moll’s position as the anti-hero.

In *Moll Flanders*, the form of narration used plays a large role in this construction of Moll as the anti-hero. In reference to Moll, Richetti says that “retrospective narration like hers produces a knowledge of experience by treating it as both freely chosen or at least freely adaptive behavior and fatefully circumscribed and fully determined” (494). I believe that Richetti’s comment on the style of narration can partially explain the differences in agency between Fanny and Moll. The reader witnesses all of Moll’s decisions, and whether or not an element of fate plays into the narrative, Moll seems to purport that she remains an active agent in her own life. Further, the reader experiences the entire novel through Moll’s narration. Even if

the reader takes into account the possibility of an unreliable narrator, the vision presented by the novel comes from one character. The form of the narration beckons the reader to sympathize with and believe Moll. Alternately, the third person narration of *Mansfield Park*, while liberating for the reader because the narrator seems more trustworthy than Moll, ultimately limits Fanny's agency. Fanny must earn her interiority through action. As she hesitantly asserts her opinion, as shown in the play scenes and in rejecting Henry Crawford, the narrator allows Fanny's thoughts to surface more and more.

The question remains then, why apply this third person narration in *Mansfield Park* when the consequences seem to entail a limitation on the main character? In Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's critical text *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the authors comment on elements present in all of Austen's works in order to question what Austen meant to accomplish with her works. While I want to avoid committing an author-fallacy, I believe several comments that Gilbert and Gubar make about Austen apply to the question I have posed. Firstly, Gilbert and Gubar write that "it is shocking how persistently Austen demonstrates her discomfort with her cultural inheritance, specifically her dissatisfaction with the tight place assigned women in patriarchy and her analysis of the economics of sexual exploitation" (112). Certainly, *Mansfield Park* constantly shows Fanny as trapped in tight spaces, both literally and figuratively. She feels most comfortable in a room without a fireplace, which guarantees a safe haven from other people; when Sir Bertram sends her away from Mansfield Park to Portsmouth, the narrator makes consistent references to the cramped space of Fanny's parents' home: "She was then taken into a parlour, so small that her first conviction was of its being only a passage-room to something better" (Austen 379). By utilizing this third person narration which limits Fanny's agency, I believe Gilbert and Gubar might suggest that Austen purposefully creates a sense of

limited space around Fanny. Therefore, the space around Fanny requires the use of third person narration because it necessarily confines Fanny's ability to vocalize her position.

This limited space that Fanny must live within necessitates her role as the wallflower heroine. Notice, in the two examples I gave to show the confined physical space around Fanny in the novel, the narrator presents only one of those, the Portsmouth home, as negative. The other example, the East room, provides her with a place to escape the difficulties of her life. Restricted space in *Mansfield Park* thus retains a neutrality, or a duality perhaps, since it can act as both a positive and a negative force. Another comment from Gilbert and Gubar will hopefully illuminate the argument I wish to build. When talking about women's place in the world of art and literature, and its tenuous existence, they write, "Austen attempted through self-imposed limitations to define a secure place, even if she seemed to admit the impossibility of actually inhabiting such a small space with any degree of comfort" (Gilbert and Gubar 108). While Gilbert and Gubar do not directly address *Mansfield Park* in this section, I see reflections of their commentary on Austen in Fanny. Fanny must carve out a place in Mansfield Park for her to truly belong. This room, the tiny space she occupies, serves that purpose. Fanny's ability to exist comfortably alone in a limited space exemplifies her as a true wallflower heroine.

The purpose of Fanny's character, from this conclusion, does not match the purpose of Moll. Moll, as the anti-hero, must break social convention in order to save herself, which her self-narration allows her to do. Fanny, as the wallflower heroine, inherently cannot go as far against convention as Moll can; Fanny must nestle within convention, whether or not she agrees with it. The purpose of limiting Fanny through the third person narrator, I believe, culminates in the building of this new kind of character. While Fanny seems Othered in the text, she gradually becomes able to cloister that Otherness, in her case within the East room. These two female characters both examine the limitations of women in their respective time periods, but approach

the examination from disparate strategies. While Moll battles against what society will let her do, Fanny sits quietly, finding a way to live within the limited space afforded to her. Similar narrative structures within the form of the novel pervade these two texts, but the difference in narration generates two completely separate prototypical characters, which have now engrained themselves within literary tradition.

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